

Autoerotic Asphyxiation

By Walt Mueller

ALERT

The black and white photo of the smiling young face caught my eye as I flipped past the obituary page of the morning paper. Printed above the photo were the words, "Kevin J. Witmer*, honor student." I read through the obituary and discovered that Kevin had been involved in camping, hiking, solving environmental problems, and had recently been named "Student of the month" at his junior-high school. The next paragraph told how Kevin had been found hanging in his bedroom. I wondered why this "all-American" kid took his own life.

Several days later a letter from Kevin's parents appeared in the newspaper. "Two weeks ago, our 14-year-old son died," they wrote. "Because the morning obituary omitted the word 'accidentally,' there has been much speculation that it was intentional. Kevin did not commit suicide. We are willing to share what little we know with any parent who wants to call us." A conversation with his mother confirmed my suspicions: Kevin had died while "scarfing."

Scarfing is a deadly form of sexual experimentation that over the years has become more widespread, particularly among young adolescent males. What is known is that autoerotic asphyxiation (the medically correct term for scarfing) is the practice of cutting off the flow of oxygen to the brain through hanging, strangulation, or suffocation in order to increase feelings of sexual pleasure while masturbating. The practice turns deadly when consciousness is lost and the person's self-rescue mechanism fails, resulting in death by hanging.

TREND

Since they don't talk openly about it in front of adults, no one knows how many teenage boys are experimenting with autoerotic asphyxiation. Those who know the most are the police, coroners, and forensic pathologists who encounter the fatal cases. What they find at the scene is evidence of masturbation along with ropes, belts, chains, knotted T-shirts, velvet cords, a rolled-up towel, or some other asphyxiating device. A leading national expert on teen suicide told me that several cases of teenage "suicide" are actually "botched attempts at scarfing", but coroners and investigating officers either don't know the signs or refuse to report them as death by autoerotic asphyxiation.

What kind of teen engages in this risky behavior? For the most part, they are kids just like Kevin. . . normal boys who appear to be well-adjusted, have lots of friends, and who do well in school. The bottom-line is that it is difficult to know who is and isn't scarfing.

So why do they do it? The best explanation can be found in the unique combination of developmental and societal factors that make scarfing more and more attractive to adolescent males.

Their age. Young teen boys are reaching sexual maturity and feeling new and exciting sexual urges for the first time. This sexual curiosity can lead them to engage in types of sexual experimentation and practice that adults know to be wrong or dangerous.

The media. The free expression of adolescent sexuality is encouraged by a media bombardment telling kids to do whatever they want, whenever they want, with whomever they want (even themselves), and however they want. The average young teen feeds on this sexually stimulating and suggestive menu of media by engaging with media for over seven-and-a-half hours a day. Besides promoting promiscuous sexual behavior, the media oftentimes openly discusses and encourages masturbation.



The age of masturbation. The epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases has led some sex-educators to promote masturbation as a low-risk sexual behavior. "Masturbation clubs" can be found in cities and towns across the U.S. and are advertised as places for adult men and women to find sexual pleasure and fulfillment "minus the dangers." Teens who turn to masturbation as a source of sexual pleasure might be attracted to employing a technique like scarfing in an effort to increase the intensity of an orgasm.

Pornography. Looking at pornography has become an unofficial rite of passage for many young boys in American society. Those who encounter, seek out, and use pornography run the risk of learning about scarfing on the Internet. Coroners often report finding hardcore pornographic literature alongside the body or on a glowing computer monitor, much of which graphically depicts and explains the "how-tos" of autoerotic asphyxiation.

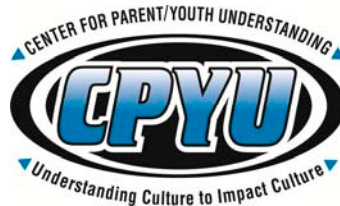
Adolescent Invulnerability. Teens are risk takers by nature. Armed with a belief that they will never die, many teen males downplay the dangers of scarfing and assume that even though some people might die from autoerotic asphyxiation, "it will never happen to me!"

What are the warning signs of scarfing? Experts say there is no valid list of warning signs. While most cases of scarfing death leave parents and others who know the victim dumbfounded because there were no warning signs or reasons for suspicion, there are some indicators that a teen may be engaging in this deadly practice. While the discovery of pornographic material is cause for concern in and of itself, there is always the chance that the pornography has taught the teen about scarfing or is being used during its practice. A fascination with ropes, knotted T-shirts or any other device that can be constricted around the neck should be read as a warning sign, particularly if they are found hidden with pornographic material. Other clear signs are neck abrasions, bloodshot eyes, and unusually excessive grogginess after spending time alone not normally spent sleeping.

While we don't know much about the underground culture of scarfing, we do know that kids are doing it, telling each other about it, and dying from it. Wise parents should continue to teach and model God's design for sexuality while using their good judgement to decide whether or not to openly discuss scarfing with their teens.

*name changed to protect identity and privacy

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